

Fact Check: 'Speculative documentary' on mermaids made some waves

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Times-Union readers want to know:

I saw a recent documentary on the Discovery Channel that showed the real life existence of mermaids. How come this didn't get more publicity?

Discovery Channel's Animal Planet aired "Mermaids: The Body Found" on May 27 as part of its Monster Week. The show focuses on scientists who are investigating whale and dolphin beachings. They discover evidence of a primate, related to humans, which has adapted to aquatic life. In addition, they find that the U.S. Navy's experiments with sonar, blamed for many whale beachings, have affected these creatures, too.

The film contains "never before seen footage" taken from a boy's cellphone in 2004 of what was said to be a mermaid that was beached in Washington state.

And the Navy, the program says, has covered up the discovery of the creatures and the spears that they hunted with.

In conjunction with the program, a website was established, believeinmermaids.com, according to Snopes.com, a website that confirms or debunks rumors and urban legends. The site merely has an opening page saying, "This domain name has been seized by DOJ [the U.S. Department of Justice] - Homeland Security Investigations, pursuant to a seizure warrant issued by a United States District Court under the authority of 18 U.S.C. §§ 286, §§ 287 and §§ 371."

The "documentary," though, is a work of fiction.

It's done in documentary style, with interviews, video and the glimpse of cellphone footage reminiscent of "The Blair Witch Project." The CGI-generated mermaids and mermen look more like "Avatar" creatures than Darryl Hannah in the movie "Splash."

The filmmaker, Charlie Foley, calls it a "speculative documentary."

In an interview with The Huffington Post, Foley said he doesn't necessarily believe that mermaids exist, but "finds it fascinating that the comely sea creatures have been talked about for thousands of years and show up in the writings of numerous cultures ...

"This is meant for entertainment," he said. "We didn't submit this for peer review."

But critics of the show were not happy that the program did not make it abundantly clear that the material was faked.

Snopes.com quotes Brad Newsome of Australia's Sydney Morning Herald, who wrote: "The version that I saw doesn't even do viewers the courtesy of admitting that it's fake until the credits are about to roll. ...

"It's not that there's anything wrong with a bit of speculative evolution, as long as you make it clear from the outset that you're making stuff up."

And from The Los Angeles Times' TV Skeptic: "You may have to look hard to see the disclaimer, but the producers and Animal Planet make it clear that this program is totally and completely made up. At least they almost make it clear. They don't exactly make a distinction between what is real and what is faked, and they really don't seem to care."

You can make your own judgment about the program: The Discovery Channel is scheduled to air it again on Sunday, June 17.